

# MeToo at the university, the support network turns ten years old

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This social movement was created in 2013 in parallel in Spain and the United States, and brought together victims and survivors of gender violence on campuses. In the case of our country, since the nineties, pioneering professors at the University of Barcelona, such as sociology professor Ramon Flecha, dared to report cases that they were aware of. University enjoys prestige on a social scale for everything it contributes to its advancement and this sometimes leads to the false myth that they live in an ivory tower. But insofar as it is made up of the same people who make up society, they have also collected examples of the same dynamics: there are cases of corruption, influence peddling, abuse of power and, obviously, **gender violence**.

In fact, when equality plans and protocols against sexual harassment were already a reality in most companies, some universities still took years to have them in place. A sign of the resistance that existed to making the problem visible and addressing it.

Currently, numerous academic institutions in Spain register cases of **sexual harassment** in their area and make them public. But the beginnings were not easy and many reluctance continues to be encountered.

**Mar Joanpere Foraster**, researcher and professor of sociology at the University of Barcelona (UB), is co-founder of a pioneering movement and also the **first victim to win a case of sexual harassment between peers** at a Spanish university.

“If I had not found the determined support of [Professor Ramon Flecha](#), I would have abandoned the university, as many women have unfortunately had to do. Thanks to this, I managed to win and gained strength to promote a solidarity network so that everyone can now have support like I had,”

she tells SINC.

Together with other 14 victims of sexual harassment, she started in 2013 the **Solidarity Network of Victims of Gender Violence in University** (SNVGVU). The silence had ended and from there the renown [MeToo University](#) movement would also emerge 2022.

*«Since this SNVGVU network has existed, as the song of victims and survivors says, we do not leave anyone isolated from the growing number of victims who come to us «*

*Mar Joanpere Foraster, University of Barcelona*

“All the international scientific evidence makes it clear that the solution is the **support of the entire community**, which does not happen by fear of [isolating gender violence](#), that is, retaliation against those of us who support the victims. Since this SNVGVU network has existed, as the song of the victims and survivors says, we do not leave anyone isolated from the growing number of victims who come to us,” emphasizes Joanpere Foraster.

Social research in this field is essential to bring evidence of impact on an international scale, offer protection and allow the development of prevention and action strategies.

The UB sociologist directs the study ***History of the #MeToo university movement in Spain***, published in the journal [Social and Education History](#). In it, in-depth interviews are carried out with people who led this transformation from its beginnings, as well as others who have recently joined, to learn about the historical scope it has had.

In this work, cases are reported such as that of **Ana Vidu**,

who currently works at the University of California-Berkeley (USA) and at the University of Deusto in the [#UniswithHeart](#) project. In 2017, she defended her doctoral thesis on gender violence in universities and became involved in controversy.

“The doctoral committee of the Sociology department in charge of evaluating the thesis approved it unanimously. However, the dean and the Equality Commission pressured the Faculty of Economics and Business to reject it,” the study highlights.

“Even the dean herself wrote the numerous words that Vidu had to include in her own dissertation. «All that was a scandal because **she broke all university rules** and she did it with a student who had received the Award for the Best Student of the Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology and the Award for the Best Student of the Master’s Degree in Sociology,» she adds.



The creation of the movement was mainly in Catalonia and very quickly it was considered in the Bank of Good Practices for the prevention of gender violence.  
/AdobeStock

# Breaking the silence, the best form of prevention

In the last decade, there has been great progress. When **Rosa Valls**, professor at the UB, published in 2016 the first research carried out on [breaking the silence of violence against women](#) that existed in the Spanish university, there were no protocols on the campuses, nor a classification of the acts that are constitutive of violence. Those who exerted it did so with total impunity.

**It was obvious that 91% of cases of attacks in Spanish universities were not reported**

In this first work, it came to light that 62% of the students had been a victim or knew someone who had been a victim of gender violence in the university environment. A social problem that had been silenced for decades. Likewise, it was obvious that 91% of cases of attacks in Spanish universities were not reported.

**Patricia Melgar Alcantud**, main scientist of the Interdisciplinary Research Group on Gender and Social Inequalities of the University of Girona (UdG), also participated in this study and has published the book [When David defeats Goliath](#) this year, along with two other researchers from the University of Girona and California.

This work tells the stories of the people behind the creation of this first SNVGVU network and cases made public more recently, such as the one in January 2022 in which the testimonies of 25 teachers who denounced, for first time, cases of gender violence were made known. Since that moment, MeToo University has multiplied the number of victims who contact them and its founders feel more supported.

“Our latest publication responds to our commitment to transfer the results of our research to society and, more specifically, to make success stories visible, survivors whose environment, like “Fuenteovejuna”, have mobilized and positioned themselves, **overthrowing those who exercise violence** and those who contribute to perpetuating it,” the researcher explains to SINC.

*Our work makes visible survivors whose environment, like “Fuenteovejuna”, have mobilized and positioned themselves to overthrow those who exert violence*

*Patricia Melgar Alcantud, University of Girona*

The creation of the movement was mainly in Catalonia and it very quickly was considered in the Bank of Good Practices for the prevention of gender violence by the Gender Violence Observatory. “In dialogue with the US movement, MeToo University has been building bridges in Spain, Europe and Latin America, receiving cases from victims from all over,” says Melgar Alcantud.

## **Improvements in the protocols**

Currently, all universities have protocols, but in some cases a lack of transparency in their implementation is identified. This occurs, for example, when publicly exposing the cases that have been reported or the **measures that have been taken in this regard**. “There is great concern about preserving the anonymity of those who commit violence, but I do not identify the same concern in ensuring that students do not remain in the hands of teachers who could harass them,” claims the UdG scientist.

All of this leads to no real figures being known about what is happening. In the best of cases, those who are reported

are known. “Knowledge about gender violence in other spaces leads us to affirm that what is reported **is only the tip of the iceberg,**” says Melgar Alcantud.

*The university has to be aware of the scientific evidence that makes it very clear that discredit is generated by non-recognition and non-action in the face of this problem*

*Mar Joanpere Foraster*

Joanpere Foraster emphasizes: “The university is an institution that has to be aware of the scientific evidence that makes it very clear that discredit is generated by non-recognition and non-action in the face of this problem, what gives prestige is recognizing it and acting according to that same evidence.»

Both consider that the protocols are essential, but not sufficient if they are not accompanied by more steps. “The first one is to improve them, most have not yet included **isolating gender violence** . The second step is to integrate support for the networks of victims and survivors, as has been done, for example, in the United States since Obama led the direct intervention of the White House to provide that support,” concludes the UB researcher.



Experts believe that the situation should be reversed and that those who are isolated and feel alone are not the victims, but rather those who carry out the violence. / Adobe Stock

## Protect those who protect

The people who have dared to break the silence, be a speaker and give a name to a problem that is still quite taboo in Spanish universities and in the world, have suffered the isolation of gender violence. Supporting victims has, in many cases, brought them a high personal and professional cost.

However, one of the victories they have achieved precisely in this sense is that some [legislation recognizes isolating gender violence](#) (IGV).

In this way, more and more people are encouraged to dare to position themselves clearly. In the long term, experts believe that this should reverse the situation and that those who are isolated and feel alone are not the victims, but rather those who carry out the violence.



*Every time we find more brave people who have stopped looking the other way*

*Patricia Melgar Alcantud*

“Every time we find more brave people who have stopped looking the other way. That is, they are playing the role of the solidarity network. This is because some protocols have also begun to recognize IGV as a form of violence. This refers to the attacks or reprisals received by those who support the victims and who, therefore, will also be protected,” says Melgar Alcantud.

## **Hiding researchers**

Scientific studies on gender violence in this field have been essential to bring about change, but it has not been an easy path. One of the impacts of this pioneering work in Spain was the incorporation into gender equality legislation, in 2007, of the legal obligation to establish protocols against gender violence in universities.

That year, the Spanish Parliament approved legislation that forced Spanish universities to recognize that they had a significant problem of sexual harassment within them and also required them to take the measures clarified by the results of this investigation. “With this, Parliament corrected a serious mistake that it had made three years earlier, when in 2004 it approved legislation on gender violence without including this point. The CRUE (Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities) **positioned itself against this recognition and against the researchers**, but they had to abide by this legislation,” point out the authors of *History of MeToo*.

*There are university governing teams, the government and*

*media that try to hide their lack of support by hiding the main scientists in gender violence*

*Mar Joanpere Foraster*

This seemed to bring a hopeful future, with greater equality and social justice, but that was not what the members of the Network experienced. Furthermore, female scientists in this field **do not receive recognition**. “What increasingly surprises researchers from all areas is that their universities hide those who study gender issues and who stand out the most in international rankings and base their training and actions on hoaxes, instead of on evidence,” Melgar Alcantud denounces.

“There are governing teams, the government and the media that try to conceal their lack of support by trying to hide the main scientists on this topic, specifically, the four Spanish women who are among the top ten worldwide in the *Google Scholar* ranking in the category of gender violence,” emphasizes Joanpere Foraster.

## **The values of the students**

The University of Córdoba (UCO) has carried out a recent study, published in the journal [\*Education Sciences\*](#), in which 1,870 students participated to find out the beliefs they have regarding gender violence. Knowing their perception of this problem is essential to address the issue in the academic field.

Among its results, it is noted that the examples of sexual harassment or gender violence least perceived by male students are, first of all, jealousy (feeling of possession), followed by constant control (activities

carried out, people with whom one is), **psychological aggression and sexist comments**.

“This does not mean that students are not aware of these types of situations, but it is very likely that they do not get to identify some of them, such as jealousy, as acts of sexual harassment or gender violence,” says **Maribel Amor Almedina**, from the UCO and co-author of the research.

Likewise, in their work they started from the hypothesis that, the greater the **academic training of the parents**, the greater the perception of gender violence behaviors of the student. However, the study showed the opposite.

“We cannot establish a decisive conclusion in this regard. In our work we analyze perceptions and we can argue that there are situations and behaviors that can be normalized in a patriarchal family, regardless of the parents’ training. Specific research should be carried out on this issue,” says **Irene Dios Sánchez**, a scientist also at the UCO.

The researchers also observed differences depending on the majors. Specifically, the students of the Social Education and Primary Education degree showed greater appreciation for this type of situations.